UNITED NATIONS

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INFORMATION

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS SECTION

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PUBLIC OPINION AND THE UNITED NATIONS

Statement by the

Under-Secretary-General of Public Information

to Representatives of Non-Governmental Organizations

United Nations Headquarters,

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PUBLIC OPINION AND THE UNITED NATIONS

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Ten months ago, I had the opportunity to speak to you about our public opinion polling programme, which I know is relevant to your work as non-governmental organizations. I hope that through meetings such as this one, you will gain insight and add new ways of spreading the word about the United Nations and its work to the general public in the United States and the world.

Allow me to begin by telling you why the UN is so interested in public opinion throughout the world and how important this polling programme is to the work of the DPI. As reflected in the UN Charter, the founding members recognized the importance of the public in the deliberations of the world organization. In order to achieve its goals, the organization needs the support of the peoples of the world. That support, as the Secretary-General has remarked, "must be based on an understanding of its accomplishments and of the reasons why its potential has not yet been fully realized".

Creating an informed understanding of the UN is central to the work of my department. It is partly for this reason that a communications research unit was created within DPI to assess the awareness, knowledge and image of the United Nations through public opinion polls. Public opinion polls are an invaluable and indispensable technique which enables my department to assess the general public's understanding of the work of the United Nations.

A total of 35,093 people in 18 countries have been surveyed in 1989 when our polling programme was initiated. Polls are currently being conducted in Kenya, Norway, Sweden and the Soviet Union. Data on the public opinion in Poland are currently being analyzed. Results from these polls are expected within the first half of this year. There are plans to conduct polls in Nigeria, Tunisia, India, Austria, Argentina, Costa Rica, Jordan and Jamaica before the end of 1990 and in about half a dozen other countries in 1991.

In order to provide for comparability of findings from the different countries being surveyed, a set of standard questions are either used in specific opinion surveys about the UN, or incorporated into existing polling programmes in some of the countries. The questions are designed to tap specific factors, namely: awareness and knowledge of the UN, its performance, information sources on the UN and interest in the issues dealt with by the UN.

The questions also incorporate basic demographic information such as age, sex and level of education of the respondent. When deemed reasonable and prudent, adjustments can be made in the language or format of the standard questionnaire to accomodate national, cultural and other factors, as well as requirements of collaborating polling organizations. In all cases, we emphasize nationally representative samples as well as ensuring that the results have no margin of error greater than three percent.

Before initiating our first poll in the United States, my department spent some time gathering polling information on the United Nations over the last forty years from around the world. This was done to ensure that we continued using similar methodology and question-wording where necessary, to assess trends in public opinion. From our research, we discovered that Gallup, and other polling organizations had previously polled questions on the United Nations on behalf of media organizations, the UNA-USA and other bodies in the United States, the European Community, Australia and Canada.

Our first poll in the United States was conducted by the Roper organization in March 1989. Our South Africa poll, commissioned by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) on behalf of the Department of Public Information, was conducted by Markinor, a market research organization in South Africa affiliated with Gallup. In Mexico, our poll was done by a Gallup affiliate called IMOP. The poll in Australia was conducted by the Roy Morgan Research Centre. Our poll in the European Community was co-ordinated by International Research Associates (INRA-Europe), in collaboration with the Commission of the European Communities.

The UN poll in Canada was done by Gallup. Allow me to bring to your attention at this point, some details about the poll in Canada where a strong relationship exists between region and mother tongue. By mother tongue I mean the language first spoken and still understood by the respondent. In Quebec, for example, French mother tongue accounts for 85 percent of the population. During the interviews, respondents were given a choice of being interviewed in either English or French in areas known to have a sizable population of both languages. Final briefing papers on all these polls with the exception of Poland, will be available next week at our NGO resource centre.

I would like to share with you now the results of all the polls. For reasons of slight differences in the questionnaire and methodological approach, I will discuss the South Africa poll results separately.

Awareness levels of the United Nations are very high in almost all the countries surveyed. Denmark has the highest awareness level of 99 percent, followed by the Netherlands with 94 percent and the United Kingdom with 93 percent. Six other countries, namely Belgium, the USA, Australia, Luxembourg, France and Canada scored 90 percent or above. Other countries have awareness levels below the 90 percent mark, with Mexico scoring the lowest at 70 percent.

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In spite of these high awareness levels, detailed knowledge of the UN institutions and work programmes is deficient. All the countries surveyed showed knowledge levels below the 50 percent mark with Denmark scoring at 48 percent and Mexico at 14 percent. In all the countries polled so far, the UN Secretary-General is well-known in Greece, Luxembourg and the Netherlands and least known in the USA, Australia, Canada and Ireland. He is better known in the European Community as a whole than in North America and Australia. Among the North American countries, Mexico has the highest awareness of the UN Secretary-General.

Perhaps the most significant finding of all the polls is that a substantial majority of people in all countries surveyed believe the United Nations is doing a good job as opposed to a poor job. The UN received its highest job rating of 73 percent in Denmark and its lowest rating of 38 percent in the United States. There still exists however, large blocs of 'Don't Knows' in almost all the countries with the exception of Denmark which has the fewest number.

In all our polls, respondents are asked to give reasons why they think the UN is doing a good or poor job. While the reasons given differed from one country to another, most centered around the UN's role as a peace-making and peace-keeping organization. Throughout its history, the United Nations has been called upon to prevent a dangerous situation from escalating into war, to persuade opposing parties to use the conference table rather than resort to arms, and to help restore peace, or at least stop the fighting, when conflicts occur. The results of our polls, particularly reasons given for rating UN performance as good, are a recognition that the organization is strengthening its capacity as a peace-making and peace-keeping organization.

To a somewhat lesser degree, people in the countries surveyed said the UN is doing a good job in helping the Third World, especially in the areas of hunger-relief, trade and economic development. Reasons given for UN's poor job rating were rather general than specific. The major concern in most countries was that the UN does not have enough power and authority to do its job properly and therefore could not be effective. Others contended that there are too many national interests for the UN to reach agreement on the issues and that it was too dependent on great world powers and political blocs. In particular, the UN's role in the Middle East received more positive than negative comments in some countries.

Two of the elements in our questionnaire elicit information on the sources that bring news about the UN to the general public. First, the Department of Public Information wants to know what are people's main sources of information about the United Nations, and secondly, whether they recall being taught about the UN at school. Concerning the main sources of information about the UN, television is the predominant in almost all the countries, followed by newspapers, radio and magazines. Other forms of dissemination such as Governmental, NGO or UN sources, come at the bottom of the list.

When asked whether they recalled being taught about the United Nations at school, over 50 percent of respondents in the United States and Mexico--the highest of all countries surveyed--said they had indeed received some teaching, most of it in high school. Among the European Community countries, Denmark registered the highest incidence of teaching about the UN at 43 percent followed by the Netherlands. Overall, the lowest scores were recorded in Ireland, Luxembourg, Portugal, Greece and the United Kingdom. Although the purpose of the polls was not to find out specifically what was taught about the UN and how it was taught, this finding points to what needs to be done in each country in providing information material on the UN at all educational levels.

After our initial poll in the United States, we decided to include in subsequent polls a question relating to how interested people were in the issues dealt with by the UN. Interest in these issues is considered very important because they allow us to analyze how well or how poorly the United Nations is doing its work. Of the 24 UN issues that respondents were presented with, environmental protection was singled-out as the most important issue in six of the countries and in the European Community as a whole. The environment was consistently mentioned among the top five issues in all countries. International peace and security was also mentioned among the top five. Other popular UN issues mentioned were drug abuse, human rights, children's issues and crime prevention. A majority of those surveyed showed great interest in many other UN issues. A small proportion of the respondents in all the countries surveyed showed little interest in UN issues such as bringing independence to Namibia, decolonization, and the new world information order.

I will now like to talk briefly about our poll in South Africa. As I said earlier, the questionnaire and the methodology used in South Africa were designed slightly different to accomodate national, cultural and other factors. Two separate samples were used in the South Africa study. The results show that more South African whites than blacks have heard of the United Nations. The awareness levels among whites were above 80 percent for all demographic groups except non-high school graduates. Similarly, many more whites than blacks could identify the Secretary-General or name a UN institution. Blacks and whites also differ significantly in their assessment of UN performance, including its handling of Namibia.

Finally, I would like to make some general remarks about all the polls conducted so far. Overall, a majority of the people in all the countries surveyed, have heard of the United Nations. However, the high awareness of the UN is not synonymous with people's detailed knowledge of the organization. This apparent lack of knowledge needs to be addressed in a more aggressive way. One possibility is through the use of television which, according to the polls, is a major source of information about the UN in almost all the countries surveyed.

Another point to be made is that the United Nations seems to be enjoying its best performance ratings in decades. This is an indication that it may have recovered from the serious image crisis that plagued the organization in the mid eighties. Major accomplishments in peace-making and peace-keeping seem to have given the United Nations a tremendous boost in popularity throughout the world. Successes in peace-keeping in Afghanistan, Cyprus, the Middle East, the Iran-Iraq war, Namibia, Central America and Western Sahara, will stand out as great achievements of the UN at the end of this decade. Not only has the UN's good job rating improved in some countries, its poor job rating has returned to its lowest in almost all countries. However, one disturbing indicator, still looms around. And that is, the large blocs of the "Don't Knows" who represent a big challenge for all of us charged with the responsibility of information dissemination.

Awareness of the UN is high, its performance rating has tremendously improved, and above all, people are showing great interest in the issues the UN has to deal with. While the environment tops the list in most of the countries, drug abuse, human rights, international peace and security, children's issues, and crime prevention top the list in others. This is an indication of a growing concern amongst the citizens of the world about issues they think national governments alone cannot solve. If anything, it is also an indication that the UN is given a universal mandate to try to solve the issues that transcend national boundaries. These positive findings, without doubt, come at a time when the UN needs the momentum and support to carry itself and the concerns of the world into the twenty first century with greater vision and hope for a better humanity.

To conclude, I would like to restate my appeal to you during the briefing on the US poll last June. I hope you will continue to assist the Department of Public Information in addressing all the key issues facing the UN not only in this country but throughout the world as revealed through our polls. I am convinced that these polls give us a clear direction and a set of tasks to perform in the public information field. Let us join hands therefore in educating the world's public about the important work which the United Nations is doing. In the end, we should be able to measure the results in increased public knowledge, understanding and appreciation of what this great institution represents and does for all the peoples of the world.

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DEBT: A CRISIS FOR DEVELOPMENT

(Not an official record or press release. This summary is made available to NGO representatives for their information and free dissemination).

On 5 April 1990, Mr. Enrique ter Horst, Assistant Secretary-General, Office of the Director-General for Development and International Economic Co-operation, briefed NGO representatives on development aspects of the debt issue.

In his opening remarks, Mr. ter Horst expressed his concern over the fact that the stock of debt of the 111 developing countries seemed to have doubled in less than ten years. In 1980 the stock of debt was $572 billion, while in 1988 it had already increased to $1200 billion. According to Mr. ter Horst, Africa and Latin America are particularly afflicted. Each continent holds a debt which is about 44 per cent of its Gross National Product (GNP): at the end of 1989 Africa held a total foreign debt of $143 billion and Latin America of $434 billion. In the case of Africa it is mainly debt from governments to governments, while in Latin America it is mainly debt owed to commercial banks. As a consequence, between 1980 and 1986 gross domestic investment per capita has declined by 40 per cent in Latin America and 75 per cent in Africa. Since then the situation has ceased to deteriorate and there have been slight improvements, Mr. ter Horst noted.

The question about the origin of the debt crisis has been rather controversial, Mr. ter Horst said. Some believe that the cause is mainly national mismanagement of the economies of the developing countries. Others believe it to be mainly the result of a set of international factors. According to Mr. ter Horst, it is probably a combination of both factors in the end. In his briefing, Mr. ter Horst focused on the international setting and the conjunction of unfavorable factors that have led to the present situation.

Mr. ter Horst mentioned four unfavorable factors which, among others, led to the debt crisis:

1) the previous level of high debt;
2) the steep rise in interest rates, given the fact that many of these loans were contracted at variable interest rates;
3) the deterioration in the terms of trade -- the purchasing power of a country's exports in relation to the cost of imports, and
4) the drying up of new finance.

Firstly, Mr. ter Horst discussed the origin of the previous level of high debt. With the recycling of the oil dollars, Mr. ter Horst explained, the international financial system was awash with money. As a consequence, commercial bankers from the industrialized countries were eager to lend developing nations money. It was extremely difficult for these countries to refuse the loans. Because real interest rates were low, indeed negative for some time, borrowing costs were very cheap. The majority of the loans were put to produce, others simply went into consumption. However, not enough productive capacities were established in order to generate additional exports that would in turn generate the foreign currency needed, Mr. ter Horst said.

Secondly, Mr. ter Horst discussed the steep rise in interest rates. The new economic policy adopted by President Reagan to finance large expenditures of arms without raising taxes left him with two choices to finance these expenditures, Mr. ter Horst said. First, there was the possibility to print money. This however, would have had strong inflationary effects on the economy both of the United States and the world. Secondly, the Reagan administration could go into debt. The latter option was chosen, which automatically resulted in an increase in interest rates. At the same time, it ensured that resources would be available to finance the large fiscal deficit in the expenditure. Furthermore, it became extremely attractive for private investors to invest in bonds or other instruments with high interest rates, especially because the U.S. dollar is a strong currency.

Another matter with which the developing nations were confronted was the deterioration of their terms of trade. Most of the indebted countries in Latin America and Africa, Mr. ter Horst explained, are commodity exporters. The deflationary policies and the slow down in the United States economy (which led to a slow-down in the other industrialized countries as well) and the need of developing countries to continue to service their debt by trying to generate foreign currency at whatever cost, led on the one hand to a diminished demand for commodities and on the other hand to an expansion of supply. Mr. ter Horst pointed out that the result was a very large decrease in prices of commodities. Moreover, it was very difficult for the developing countries to compensate this with larger exports. Consequently, the developing nations saw a worsening of their terms of trade.

Mr. ter Horst observed that in the beginning the debt crisis was considered to be a liquidity crisis. It was felt that the economies of the developing countries were fundamentally viable and once the cash-flow problem was solved the situation would improve. However, contrary to expectations the demand for commodities continued to fall as the economies of the industrialized countries were basing their growth increasingly on the growth of the service sector. Because of the need of developing countries to increase their foreign exchange earnings, production remained high as well.

The continuation of this situation made the debt crisis acquire the character of an insolvency crisis. In other words, country after country was going bankrupt and their economies had become unviable, Mr. ter Horst added. Previously conjunctural factors like the price of commodities and the rate of interest had been transformed into structural factors.

With this perception in mind the international community now had to deal with the debt crisis, Mr. ter Horst said. The first generation of structural adjustments programmes that were designed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank were in the first place intended to lower the exposure of the international banks. This was mainly achieved by cutting consumption in the developing countries and compressing investment to a minimum. This also implied, among other things, the nationalization of private debt. The private sector was now allowed to pay in national currency while assuming to have paid in foreign currency. Thus, the debt was consolidated in the hands of the government, which also made the negotiations with the banks easier, Mr. ter Horst said.

The governments now had several choices: either to print money, go into debt, increase taxes or cut expenditure. All were done to a certain extent, but probably not to the extent of affecting the stability of a country, Mr. ter Horst said. Internationally, this led to two steps:

1) the recognition that countries could not be squeezed;
2) a change in the international debt strategy.

In 1985 the then United States Treasury Secretary, James Baker, suggested a plan for developing countries to "grow out" of their debt problems. In the case of commercial debt, Mr. ter Horst argued, this plan represented a conceptual breakthrough, in the sense that it recognized that the only way debtor nations had to repay their debt was to grow again. This of course needed new financing. The one drawback of the plan was that the banks had to lend on a voluntary basis. The propositions ended up to be too unattractive for the banks and the "Baker Plan" came and went without making much of a difference, Mr. ter Horst said.

In June 1988, at a summit in Toronto, the seven leading Western industrial nations, known as the Group of Seven, agreed in the case of Africa to a new range of debt relief options. These were later made official policy by the Paris Club of official creditors, Mr. ter Horst said. The options, covering official debt only, offered specific guidelines for:

a) forgiving one third of debt service due, and rescheduling the rest;
b) extending the maturity date on loans, and
c) reducing interest rates to below-market levels.

These options are to be applied to countries in the course of negotiations between creditors and debtor countries in the framework of the Paris Club, Mr. ter Horst explained. However, the savings provided by these measures are not expected to be large.

In this respect the "Brady Plan", as outlined in early 1989 by United States Treasury Secretary Nicholas Brady, went an important step further, Mr. ter Horst argued. It recognized the existence of a debt overhang, which made the economies of the debtor countries unviable in the present circumstances.

The negotiations within the framework of the "Brady Plan" have been slow and their effectiveness has not really been measured anywhere. The first country to agree on the programme was Mexico, Mr. ter Horst noted. Although its effects have not been measured entirely, the programme seems to have represented a considerable reduction in both debt and debt service.

Mr. ter Horst pointed out that this so-called securitization of the external debt of developing countries in the end means that this is the last debt negotiation these countries are entering. It will not be possible, Mr. ter Horst explained, to negotiate with the host of creditors once the banks have sold most of their bonds. Therefore, Mr. ter Horst expressed his hopes that conditions will be achieved which will enable the economies to grow again and that flight capital will return.

According to Mr. ter Horst, the challenge now seems to be to extend both the philosophy and the objective of the "Brady Plan" and of the Toronto agreement to the largest possible number of countries in the shortest possible frame of time. In this way both Africa and Latin America will be allowed to join the important international economic developments that are taking place.

The debt crisis, Mr. ter Horst said, has become a political problem. This recognition has led the Secretary-General of the United Nations to enlist the help of an international political figure like Mr. Bettino Craxi, former Prime Minister of Italy. Mr. Craxi is to explore ways and means to accelerate and extend this process and to convince mainly the creditor countries to both extend the "Brady Plan" as soon as possible and ensure that the necessary financing will be available. Perhaps one of the strongest reasons to accelerate a solution, Mr. ter Horst concluded, is that the most vulnerable groups are paying the highest price for this debt crisis.